

Original Paper

An Investigation into the Intercultural Communicative Competence of Senior English Majors

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Abstract

This study employs a questionnaire survey to assess the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology. The Assessment Scale of Intercultural Communicative Competence for Chinese College Students is utilized to examine their ICC across six dimensions. Findings reveal that participants demonstrate an above-average level of overall ICC, with notable disparities among dimensions: attitude ranks highest, while foreign cultural knowledge shows relatively lower competence. Regression analysis identifies foreign cultural knowledge and intercultural communication skills as the most influential predictors of overall ICC. Additionally, students who engaged in intercultural courses exhibit statistically significantly higher ICC scores than non-participants, highlighting the efficacy of intercultural courses. The study underscores the need to integrate contextualized cultural knowledge and authentic communicative scenarios in English major education to address dimensional gaps and enhance holistic ICC development.

Keywords

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC), Senior English majors, Investigation

1. Introduction

Internationalisation has accentuated the importance of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among language learners in higher education in the 21st century (Huang, 2021). In the contemporary era characterized by the escalating interconnectedness of nation-states, the magnitude of international competition has reached unprecedented levels. Therefore, developing the intercultural communicative competence of language learners is of paramount importance. This proficiency is essential for effectively telling China's stories well, enhancing its global voice, and engaging in international discourse. Furthermore, the progressive implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative is expected to engender a

substantial upsurge in the demand for research on intercultural communication within the Chinese academic and practical domains.

International intercultural communication research is highly pragmatic, focusing on solving real-world issues such as cross-cultural conflicts and adaptation challenges among immigrants, international students, and patients. It was in the 21st century that the field expanded to encompass language, linguistics, and language teaching, with translation, ICC, and language pedagogy emerging as key hotspots in the past five years (Ma et al., 2020). Empirical approaches dominate international studies: qualitative research takes the largest share, followed by mixed methods, while quantitative research is gaining increasing attention (Shi & Shan, 2016). By contrast, domestic research demonstrates a vigorous and sustainable development momentum (Chi & Lin, 2014) but tends to focus more on language teaching compared to international scholarship (Hu, 2005). Interdisciplinary attention remains concentrated in linguistics, economics, and culturology, and non-empirical methods still constitute the mainstream (Shi & Zhu, 2015).

This study adopts a quantitative approach to evaluate the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of 131 senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology. Drawing on the assessment scale developed by Wu Weiping, Fan Weiwei, and Peng Renzhong (2013), it systematically examines the students' ICC levels. Given the pivotal role English majors play in articulating China's narratives in the contemporary era, and considering senior students' greater linguistic and knowledge accumulation relative to juniors, assessing their ICC is of paramount significance. Thus, this research offers considerable practical implications.

2. Research Background

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has been conceptualized diversely across scholarly traditions. Hymes (1972) pioneered the construct of "communicative competence," arguing that language learners must integrate linguistic knowledge with the ability to use language appropriately in authentic communicative contexts. This framework unveiled the sociocultural dimension of competence—specifically, the knowledge and skills required to communicate effectively based on one's social identity. Expanding on this, Spitzberg (2000) and Byram (2000) defined ICC as contextually effective and appropriate communicative behavior, with a distinct focus on interactions across cultural boundaries. Despite disciplinary variations in definition, a synthesis of scholarship identifies two universal evaluative criteria for ICC: effectiveness (pragmatic success) and appropriateness (situational suitability), which collectively anchor assessments of intercultural communication quality.

Theoretical frameworks of ICC have evolved dynamically, with sociolinguistic research traditionally linking ICC to the broader construct of communicative competence (Xu, 2011). Hymes emerged as a key critic of Chomsky's "linguistic competence," which he considered overly restrictive for its exclusive focus on grammatical knowledge and neglect of situational adaptability. In response, Hymes proposed a four-component model: grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence.

However, Hymes' framework is limited by its focus on intralingual (single-language) social interaction, making it less applicable to foreign language teaching and intercultural research. Early efforts to address this gap came from Canale and Swain (1980) and Van Ek, who adapted communicative competence for language pedagogy. Canale and Swain identified four interconnected yet autonomous competencies: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. Van Ek extended this to a six-component model incorporating linguistic, sociocultural, and social competence—but this framework faced criticism, notably from Byram (2020), who argued it implicitly prioritized native-speaker or dominant cultural group proficiency as the benchmark.

Alptekin (2002) further challenged the native-speaker norm on three grounds: first, the "ideal native speaker" is a fiction due to linguistic variation within language systems; second, pursuing native-like proficiency is untenable, as language's primary function is to facilitate communication—especially among non-native speakers; and third, this benchmark constrains teacher and student autonomy in language education. Byram (2020) supported these concerns, noting that native-speaker standards risk demotivating learners and eroding their native language and cultural identities.

As skepticism toward the traditional "communicative competence" framework mounted, research attention shifted toward ICC—with Byram making seminal contributions to its conceptualization. He proposed four core dimensions of ICC: (1) knowledge (understanding of one's own and foreign cultures); (2) attitude (open, inquisitive respect for cultural difference); (3) skills (intercultural communicative and cognitive capacities); and (4) awareness (critical cultural consciousness, self-awareness, and sociolinguistic awareness).

Despite the recent proliferation of empirical ICC research, a notable gap persists: most studies focus on non-English majors preparing for study abroad, with far less attention to English majors—who play a pivotal role in cross-cultural communication. To address this, the present study draws on Byram's multidimensional model to develop an evaluative framework centered on knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness. This framework is used to systematically assess the ICC of senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology, providing a nuanced analysis of their intercultural proficiency.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

- (1) To what extent is Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) currently manifested among senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology?
- (2) Within the six-dimensional framework utilized for ICC assessment, which specific dimension demonstrates the strongest explanatory power for enhancing overall ICC proficiency?
- (3) Will participation in intercultural courses lead to a statistically significant improvement in the ICC levels of senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology?

3.2 Research Participants

The sample population for this questionnaire consisted of senior-level English majors at Hubei University of Technology. Data collection was distributed via an electronic survey platform, yielding a total of 149 responses. Following a rigorous data cleaning process, 18 invalid questionnaires were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 131 valid responses with an effective response rate of 87.92%.

Of the 131 respondents, 37 are male and 94 are female, all enrolled in English major programs. Demographic analysis revealed that 98 participants had engaged in school-offered intercultural courses, while only 13 possessed study-abroad experience in English-speaking countries. English language proficiency was operationalized through scores on the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4), which is closely linked to ICC, as its question types implicitly integrate cultural assessment dimensions. For example, listening and reading sections often include texts with cross-cultural scenarios or cultural themes, requiring test-takers to interpret cultural cues and analyze cultural dynamics. Meanwhile, language usage questions like idioms and occasional intercultural-themed writing tasks further demand the application of ICC-related knowledge, making TEM-4 an indirect gauge of English majors' ICC alongside linguistic proficiency. Descriptive statistics indicated that among the 131 valid responses, three participants (2.29%) had not taken the TEM-4. The remaining scores were distributed as follows: 10 respondents (7.63%) scored below 60, 50 (38.17%) scored between 60 and 70, 54 (41.22%) scored between 70 and 80, and 14 (10.69%) achieved scores above 80.

3.3 Research Instrument

The present study employed a quantitative research approach through the administration of a structured questionnaire utilizing the Chinese College Students' Intercultural Communication Competence Assessment Scale (AI-CCS), a validated instrument developed by Wu Weiping, Fan Weiwei, and Peng Renzhong. The questionnaire was systematically organized into two distinct sections. The first section was designed to collect personal information, including variables such as gender, class, TEM-4 scores, overseas experience, and participation in intercultural courses. The second section focused on the assessment of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), featuring a total of 28 items that were conceptually grouped into six primary dimensions. Specifically, three items were allocated to measure awareness (AW), three items to evaluate attitude (AT), nine items to assess intercultural communication skills (SKA), three items to gauge intercultural cognitive skills (SKB), three items to examine domestic cultural knowledge (KNA), and seven items to explore foreign cultural knowledge (KNB). A five-point Likert scale was adopted as the scoring mechanism, with each item's score corresponding directly to the numerical value selected by the respondents. The scoring system utilized a positive linear transformation, such that higher numbers indicated a greater degree of proficiency in the respective ICC constructs. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.953. The subscale Cronbach's α values ranged from 0.747 to 0.893 for the six dimensions, collectively indicating robust reliability of the instrument.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Overall ICC Level of Participants

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 reveal that the average score of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is 3.68 points, with all six dimensions achieving scores exceeding 3.5 points. This indicates that the ICC of senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology generally falls within an above-average level. However, when evaluated against the rigorous demands of students with a pressing desire to effectively narrate China's stories or engage in overseas studying, this score may be considered suboptimal. Breaking down the six dimensions, the dimension pertaining to knowledge of foreign culture (KNB) secured a score of 3.51, ranking as the relatively lowest among all categories. Notably, the attitude dimension (AT) demonstrated the highest average value at 4.34, followed by the awareness dimension (AW) at 3.79, knowledge related to local culture (KNA) at 3.73, intercultural cognitive skills (SKB) at 3.59, intercultural communication skills (SKA) at 3.56, and finally, knowledge of foreign culture (KNB) at 3.51, forming a clear hierarchy in descending order of scores. This distribution highlights distinct strengths in attitudinal engagement and awareness, while pinpointing local and foreign cultural knowledge and intercultural skills as notable areas for improvement.

Table 1. The Overall Level of ICC

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ICC	131	2.04	4.54	3.68	0.74
KNA	131	1.33	5.00	3.73	0.94
KNB	131	1.29	5.00	3.51	0.98
AT	131	2.33	5.00	4.34	0.56
SKA	131	1.67	4.67	3.56	0.83
SKB	131	1.00	5.00	3.59	0.92
AW	131	1.00	5.00	3.79	0.85

The collective ICC of senior English learners at Hubei University of Technology embodies the salutary influences exerted by the recent progresses in teaching reform, academic scholarship, and technological innovation. Since the convening of the "1st International Symposium on Intercultural Communication" in China in 1995, intercultural communication education has witnessed substantial advancements. In 2000, intercultural communication teaching has emerged as a new subject in China's language teaching (Xu, 2000). However, in the early stages, China's ICC-related policies were vague, lacking clear objectives and curriculum demands for intercultural education, which hindered effective implementation in foreign language teaching (Zhang, 2012). As research progresses, the goals and content of intercultural education in language teaching have become more explicit. The 2020 College English Teaching Guide highlights the need to boost students' intercultural awareness and competence, and promotes a curriculum

combining General English, English for specific purposes, and intercultural communication courses. The current status of intercultural communicative competence among senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology demonstrates the achievements of China's foreign language teaching reforms in recent years.

The continuous advancement in intercultural education research in China has established a systematic framework for students to enhance their ICC. Theoretical research into intercultural competence have facilitated the development of localized models and theoretical constructs, providing educators with actionable guidance for pedagogical practice. For instance, Yang and Zhuang (2007) constructed a model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) for foreign language teaching, analyzing the components of ICC, including global awareness, cultural adaptation, knowledge, and communicative practice. Gao (2014) proposed a cross-cultural communicative competence assessment system for Chinese college students based on a theoretical model that integrates intercultural knowledge and action. Lv and Yu (2021) specified that bidirectional cultural teaching which balances the target language culture and local culture represents an effective approach to addressing the "local cultural aphasia" among foreign language learners. This approach also serves as a viable solution to the challenges in cultivating comprehensive intercultural communication talents in the current context. The theoretical contributions and empirical study of these scholars have made significant contributions to the cultivation and education of intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

The survey findings reveal that senior English majors demonstrate substantial motivation and enthusiasm for intercultural communication, as reflected by their attitude dimension scores exceeding 4 points. This strong enthusiasm can be primarily attributed to the learners' specific academic requirements and long-term goals. As future disseminators of Chinese stories and voices, or prospective international university students, these learners recognize the critical role of English in both daily interactions and academic exchanges. Anticipating frequent use of English in cross-cultural contexts, they exhibit a heightened need to develop intercultural communication competencies, which in turn reinforces their motivational drive. However, while the questionnaire results indicate that senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology possess a strong motivation for intercultural communication—signifying their positive awareness and attitudes toward it—their performance in the knowledge dimension lags behind their motivational level. This suggests that although students currently exhibit ideal intercultural communication awareness, they suffer from insufficient intercultural communication knowledge. The cultivation of intercultural communication skills is fundamentally rooted in knowledge and attitudes; without adequate intercultural knowledge, the development of such skills becomes unattainable (Byram, 1997). This deficiency also constitutes one of the reasons for the lowest average score in the foreign culture dimension. The result further reflects a problem in foreign language education at Chinese universities: excessive emphasis on language skill acquisition at the expense of cultural knowledge input. This educational approach of *prioritizing competence over culture* contradicts the learning principles of

intercultural communication disciplines, potentially rendering intercultural communication training a "tree without roots" and deviating from the original purpose of cultural communication.

Notably, students demonstrate a commendable understanding of their national cultural knowledge, surpassing the average benchmark. This achievement is intricately linked to the enhancement of cultural identity and cultural confidence, serving as a cornerstone for effective cross-cultural engagement. The impetus behind this trend can be traced back to the concerted efforts within domestic foreign language education. There is a growing emphasis on proficiently narrating Chinese stories and disseminating Chinese perspectives, paralleling the nation's strategic focus on augmenting native language cultural input to mitigate the issue of "cultural aphasia." Empirical evidence from educational curricula, as illustrated by Sheng's (2023) research, reveals that in the 2019 edition of high school English textbooks, Chinese culture accounts for the largest proportion, reaching 32.59%. It is anticipated that as educational policies continue to evolve and mature, students' comprehension of their cultural heritage will deepen further. This progression is expected to enable them to become more confident and adept disseminators of Chinese culture in intercultural exchanges. However, a contrasting scenario emerges when examining students' intercultural cognitive skills and intercultural communication skills, where their scores remain suboptimal. This shortfall can be plausibly attributed to the scarcity of authentic intercultural communication opportunities. Predominantly confined to theoretical learning from classrooms and textbooks, students often lack immersive experiences in real-world intercultural settings, thereby hindering the practical application and refinement of their intercultural competencies.

4.2 Regression Analysis

As presented in Table 2, the regression model exhibited good explanatory power, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.682, indicating that 68.2% of the variance in total ICC scores could be accounted for by the six dimensions. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.987, approaching the ideal value of 2, which verified the absence of significant autocorrelation among residuals and thus satisfied the assumptions of linear regression.

The results revealed differential predictive effects of the six dimensions on ICC, with intercultural communication skills (SKA) and foreign cultural knowledge (KNB) emerging as the most influential predictors. For intercultural communication skills (SKA), the standardized coefficient (β) was 0.324 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that each one-standard-deviation increase in this dimension was associated with a 0.324-standard-deviation increase in total ICC scores, holding other variables constant. Foreign cultural knowledge (KNB) also demonstrated a strong predictive role, with a standardized coefficient of 0.297 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a significant positive relationship with overall ICC.

To ensure the reliability of regression coefficients, multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) and tolerance values. All VIF values ranged from 1.123 to 3.876, well below the critical threshold of 10, and all tolerance values exceeded 0.2. These results confirmed the absence of severe multicollinearity among independent variables, validating the stability of the regression estimates.

The findings align closely with Byram's (1997) integrative model, demonstrating that ICC development hinges on the synergistic integration of cultural knowledge, attitudinal openness, and performative skills. The dominance of SKA and KNB underscores the necessity for foreign language education curricula to balance systematic instruction in context-specific cultural norms with structured skill-building in real-world intercultural scenarios—such as cross-cultural role-playing or immersive projects. This evidence-based framework not only advances theoretical understandings of ICC as a multidimensional construct but also provides a roadmap for educational interventions aimed at cultivating globally competent communicators capable of navigating diverse intercultural contexts.

Table 2. Regression Analysis

	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	sig	VIF	R ²	D-W
	coefficients		coefficients					
	B	Std. Error	Beta					
KNA	0.156	0.048	0.143	3.250	0.001	2.145	0.682	1.987
KNB	0.289	0.057	0.297	5.070	<0.001	3.876		
AT	0.082	0.056	0.076	1.464	0.182	1.123		
SKA	0.317	0.062	0.324	5.113	<0.001	3.542		
SKB	0.135	0.053	0.128	2.547	0.012	2.768		
AW	0.073	0.054	0.069	1.352	0.215	1.897		

Dependent variable: ICC

4.3 Correlation Analysis

As presented in Table 3, the descriptive statistics indicated that the mean score of Intercultural Competence (ICC) among students who participated in intercultural courses (N=98, M=3.963, SD=0.5263) was notably higher than that of non-participating students (N=33, M=2.827, SD=0.6381). This quantitative comparison highlights the potential association between intercultural course engagement and elevated ICC scores, as reflected in the mean differences and standard deviations provided.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

	Intercultural Courses	N	Mean	Std. deviation
ICC	participated	98	3.963	0.5263
	not participated	33	2.827	0.6381

As documented in Table 4, the independent samples t-test revealed significant group differences in both the total score of Intercultural Competence (ICC) and all sub-dimensions between students who

participated in intercultural courses and non-participants. Statistically, the total ICC score demonstrated a highly significant difference ($p < 0.01$) between the two groups, with the participating cohort ($M = 3.963$, $SD = 0.5263$) outperforming non-participants ($M = 2.827$, $SD = 0.6381$). These findings provide empirical support for the effectiveness of intercultural courses offered by the School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Technology, in enhancing students' intercultural competence. The robust statistical significance ($p < 0.01$) underscores the practical implications of curricular interventions in fostering intercultural proficiency.

Table 4. Independent Sample t-test

Dimensions	t	sig
ICC	10.153	<0.01
KNA	9.833	<0.01
KNB	7.537	<0.01
AT	0.924	0.357
SKA	9.264	<0.01
SKB	8.399	<0.01
AW	10.670	<0.01

A comparative analysis across the six dimensions revealed that statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) was observed in local and foreign cultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills, cognitive strategies, and cultural awareness—indicating substantial positive effects of intercultural course enrollment on these five dimensions. Specifically, engagement with intercultural curricula was associated with enhanced understanding of domestic and global cultural frameworks, thereby expanding students' shared knowledge repositories essential for effective intercultural interaction. Furthermore, course participants demonstrated more objective and constructive perceptions of cultural disparities, greater readiness to navigate cultural shock, and improved capacities for reflective problem-solving in cross-cultural contexts. Notably, the dimension of intercultural attitude remained statistically unchanged, a finding attributed to the limited integration of authentic communicative scenarios in instructional design. This suggests that while curricular content effectively fosters knowledge acquisition and cognitive skill development, attitudinal shifts—critical for deepening intercultural competence—may require immersive, real-world engagement opportunities. The lack of significant improvement in attitudes warrants careful consideration and curricular adjustments to prioritize experiential learning modalities in future course design, ensuring alignment between instructional methods and holistic competence-building objectives.

4. Conclusion

This study quantitatively investigates the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of senior English majors at Hubei University of Technology, revealing that their overall ICC score averages 3.68, indicating a moderate-upper level, with notable dimensional disparities: knowledge related to domestic culture, knowledge related to foreign culture, attitude, intercultural communication skills, intercultural cognitive skills, and awareness. Regression analysis identifies intercultural communication skills and foreign cultural knowledge as the strongest predictors of ICC, while participation in intercultural courses significantly enhances ICC, particularly in cultural knowledge and cognitive skills. The findings highlight that although English majors demonstrate strong attitudinal openness due to disciplinary training, deficits in contextualized cultural knowledge and practical skills persist, attributable to insufficient authentic communication scenarios in curricula.

Practically, this study advocates integrating foreign cultural knowledge modules and designing immersive communicative contexts to bridge theory and practice. Bidirectional cultural teaching, emphasizing both domestic and foreign cultural frameworks, is also critical to address "cultural aphasia" and foster balanced ICC development. Digital innovations, such as intelligent platforms, offer promising avenues to enhance experiential learning.

However, the study's single-institution sample and lack of longitudinal data limit generalizability. Future research should adopt mixed methods across diverse institutions, explore the impact of study abroad and digital intercultural platforms, and investigate bidirectional teaching's role in reducing cultural knowledge gaps. By addressing these limitations, intercultural education can better cultivate globally competent communicators capable of navigating through complex cross-cultural contexts.

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